

# Can the Republican Party Begin to Look Forward?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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For the Republican Party 2008 will be a challenging year. The polls show that one of two things is likely to happen. Either there will be a major victory across the board for the Democratic Party, or John McCain will manage to squeak out a very close victory in the presidential election but will still confront substantial Democratic majorities in both houses of congress.

To some extent the Republicans electoral woes can be attributed to an unpopular president winding down his second term while the country is mired in an unpopular war and the economy is struggling. More thoughtful Republicans, however, may begin to realize that something larger than this is going on. In recent decades, the Republican coalition has rested on three core groups: social conservatives, foreign policy hawks, and small government/anti-tax voters. Although this coalition was first forged by Richard Nixon in 1968, it could more accurately be described as the Reagan coalition because nobody held it together as well as Reagan. Through his hawkish views on the Soviet Union, anti-tax rhetoric and conservative social views, Reagan was able to get elected president relatively easily two times. Moreover, he seemed to effortlessly balance the needs of these three often conflicting constituencies. Wealthy voters who were not social conservatives seemed unconvinced that he was really a social conservative, while social conservatives did not seem to mind that he prioritized tax cuts and building up the military over their goals.

The Reagan Coalition is falling apart now and McCain's candidacy exacerbates the problem. Anti-tax/small government voters feel betrayed by Bush's big government conservatism and don't trust McCain on tax issues. Social conservatives, and their close kin Christian evangelicals, feel let down by a president for whom they worked very hard and are somewhat reluctant to stay involved at that level. McCain's base constituency is the hawk wing of the party, but the war in Iraq has reduced their influence and number as well.

The challenges McCain and his party face are both long term and immediate in nature. The immediate need is to identify a macro-strategy for this campaign. At this time, the campaign seems to have crafted a strategy based on frightening voters about security, arguing that we have turned a corner in Iraq, assuming the GOP base, particularly social conservatives will still support the party and its candidate, and raising general fears about an Obama presidency. Currently, the polling and other data suggest this approach is not working and that McCain will lose in November.

The Republican Party would be better served not by trying to squeeze one last victory out of the Reagan Coalition, but by beginning to pivot towards the future. McCain is not the ideal candidate to do this as the McCain narrative seems more Cold War nostalgic than future oriented. Nonetheless, McCain, if he acts soon, can begin this process.

There are three things McCain can do in this campaign to help move his party forward. The first and most urgent is to move away from the politics of hate and intolerance which have served his party well in the past. There are obvious principled reasons for doing this, but there are strategic reasons as well. While there is still ample intolerance in America, the Republican Party, by catering to that constituency has alienated voters, particularly in the North, who might otherwise be drawn to the party on security or economic grounds. America has also changed as demonstrated by Mike Huckabee, a southern fundamentalists and conservative Christian, who did not focus his campaign on what were previously wedge issues like abortion and gay marriage, but chose to present himself in a much less angry way. Moreover, even as California has now legalized gay marriage, it is still not become an issue in the campaign. McCain has a reputation as a decent and tolerant Republican. He should take advantage of that reputation and move his party in that direction, rather setting his party back by trying to move closer to the more intolerant wing of his party.

The second thing McCain needs to do is to expand the discussion on foreign policy. His claims of having greater experience than Obama have not helped him much because he has only really talked about the broader Middle East, which always brings the conversation back to Iraq, thus highlighting Obama's long time opposition to the war, which is an electoral strength. The Republican Party has always counted on being viewed as the better party on foreign policy, a task which George W. Bush has made extremely difficult. McCain can help restore this for the future by beginning to talk about other areas of the world and propose a global foreign policy vision, not based simply on military activity, which would demonstrate that he has a depth of understanding and experience of broader foreign policy issues.

Lastly, Mitt Romney spent a great deal of the primary season reminding voters that McCain himself has said he does not really understand economic issues. Romney was unable to take the nomination from McCain, but this accusation resonated with many voters. Moreover, the standard Republican message of fewer taxes and less spending seems tone deaf in 2008 when the issues about which most voters are concerned are too complex to be solved by rhetoric. McCain, and the Republican Party more broadly, need to work to revise this image. It is essential that McCain learn to speak fluently about some aspects of the economy and that he pick at least 2-3 economic proposals which he can support and describe with some detail. The substance of the reforms themselves are less important, frankly, than McCain demonstrating that he can, in fact, understand the economy and discuss it in some depth.

I have never been a Republican strategist and certainly do not intend to begin now, so I am not writing this to try to help McCain and the Republican Party. However, it is important for the Democratic Party to stay a step ahead of the Republican Party on these questions. Working within the basic framework of the Reagan Coalition, the Republican Party has shown itself to be very clever, flexible and quick to learn over the last four decades, often more so than the Democratic Party.

The Obama campaign is well positioned to preempt McCain on most of these issues, but only if they move first. For example, Obama is far better positioned to speak of foreign policy more broadly and in non-military terms. He has done this more than McCain throughout the campaign, but would benefit from doing this in more visible fora and in demonstrating expertise in a broad

range of regional issues. As the Democratic nominee, Obama must continue to own economic issues, and frame his proposals that so that they will appeal to middle class voters who are concerned about the economy but not suffering economically. These are voters who could move to a more tolerant Republican Party if they believe the Democratic Party is not speaking to them. If Obama does this the right way, and precludes the Republicans from beginning to redefine their party through any of these approaches, he will not only help secure his victory in 2008, but will help frame the political debate in a way that will bear fruit for the Democrats for several elections to come.